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AUTHOR Aiex, Nola Kortner
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ABSTRACT

In 1927 the Brazilian modernist writer, Jose Bento Monteiro Lobato, traveled to New York City with his family, where he took up a position as economic attache at the Brazilian Consulate. For 4 years he and his family lived in Jackson Heights, while he worked and observed the feverish activity that was making the United States the foremost and most modern country in the world. His many letters back home to Brazil to his closest friends and relatives are filled with the images of a great city, his admiration for the United States, and the impressions of the people around him, including both everyday folk and outstanding persons like Henry Ford. The letters are colloquial, vibrant, expressive, and personal. They can serve intermediate students of Portuguese as lessons in how to write a letter and also as travel literature and popular history. (Contains seven notes.) (NKA)

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The Image of New York City in the 1920s through the Eyes of the Brazilian Modernist Writer, Monteiro Lobato

Nola Kortner Aiex

Popular Culture Association Meetings, San Antonio, March 1997

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N. K. Aiex

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Edgard Carvalho, who edited the collected works of the Brazilian Modernist writer, Monteiro Lobato in 1964, characterized Lobato's letters as "an immense correspondence scattered over the four corners of Brazil." (1) Carvalho goes on to remark about the rarity of letter writing among Brazilian literary figures, and about Lobato's singularity as a correspondent in that "he never let the most insignificant note go by without replying." His letter writing style was personal, informal, and vibrant. In an essay on writing, Patricia Carini reflects on the relationship of writing to identity, history, and personal expression. "Style and conventions," she also says, "set the pitch for the language usage of an era." (2) In a bibliometric analysis, Priscilla Thomas traces the use of the epistolary form in literature from its beginnings in antiquity to the present day. Evolution of the literary form began "with a single letter written to convey a singular message." (3) I should say that epistolary literature is also rare in Brazilian literature, just as is letter writing. Why do the style and tone of Lobato's letters seem so fresh and modern even today, 65 or 70 years after they were written? Certainly, the things that he marvels at as new and exciting now bring smiles when one reads the letters. However, perhaps because his experience was as a writer of many varieties and types of materials, he brings a plainness, honesty, and insouciance to his observations. Lobato always seems to be writing directly to an audience of one.

Jose Bento Monteiro Lobato was born late in the 19th century in Brazil, into an upper class, even aristocratic family, although they were not wealthy. He was raised on the family farm in the interior of the state of Sao Paulo, a farm which he left only when he could no longer keep it running and had to sell it. He had spent his law school years in Sao Paulo, and he returned there with his wife to live in 1917. Lobato collaborated on several literary magazines, practiced journalism, and set up his own publishing house in 1918. In fact, all during the years from 1918 onward, he was writing and publishing books, stories, and translations of all kinds, from general adult

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literature to fiction for children to polemical treaties on modern art and Brazilian politics. (4)

Monteiro Lobato was a protean figure in the intellectual life of Brazil--a lawyer, a writer, and a sometime diplomat who believed strongly in progress and in the modernization of his country. The dual career of writer and diplomat is not uncommon in Latin America--witness the current example of Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican writer who is also a diplomat.

Monteiro Lobato's collected letters date from about 1895 to 1935, but it is the letters from between 1927 and 1931 that interest me most. From 1927 until 1931 Lobato served as the commercial attache at the Brazilian Consulate in New York City. During those years he lived in an apartment in Jackson Heights, Long Island, with his wife and three children. He was tutored in English (he felt that he did not speak English well); he observed everything that went on around him; he reported back to his friends and family in Brazil about the wonders of America in general and New York City in particular. His letters are filled with praise for the modern society, the brilliance of Henry Ford, and the vibrancy of New York City. (5) He describes and gives opinions about the modern American women that he sees walking along New York's streets on their way to their jobs in offices--he does call them "girls," but it was before the time of political correctness. He also discusses the fordmidable American clubwomen, whom he sees as running the country. But mostly, Lobato's letters are filled with wonder at the progress and modernity of America.

In a letter to a close friend dated September 18, 1927, a few months after he arrived in New York, Lobato writes: "What can I tell you about this marvelous country?...A week ago I went to Washington by car--in 650 kilometers there and back, going through numerous little towns, lovely as dreams, I didn't see one poor person or one beggar." (Monteiro Lobato, Cartas Escolhidas, Vol.1, p207) The comparison of the organization and modernity of the United States with what Lobato sees as the backwardness of his own country is implicit, even when not directly stated--this is a theme which runs through the letters.

The reader knows that he or she is in another era, however, when Lobato writes home about the prices of goods and services in the New York of 1927--"the median price of a silk dress is $10." (p.203) Inviting a close friend to come to the United States and stay with him and his family in Jackson Heights, Lobato warns the friend that if he stays in a hotel, he will need $5 a day for a decent room.

In a 1928 letter Lobato writes about how his wife does not miss an issue of "The Evening Graphic," particularly the section on crime and the courts. He writes that she's "especially interested in divorce cases and the doings of the Chicago gangs. How audacious they are, what marvelous criminals! The 'gangland,' the 'gangdom' of this country is the only one in the world and their sustained fight against the police is becoming epic. You have probably seen something about them in the movies--there is an actor, William Powell, who specializes in the elegant gangster. The newest thing now is the 'speakies'

(talkies). There are the 'movies' that you know, the silent films. The 'speakies' are the talking pictures and already so well done that the illusion that they are talking shadows on the screen is perfect." (p259)

A November 1928 letter speaks of the plethora of everything here. "Yesterday," writes Lobato, "the stock market attained a new record--6,641,250 shares sold...And the 'thrills' every day? The Graf Zeppelin, that passed right over our Broadway, shining like our silver kettle when Purezinha (his wife) shines it! Every day something new. But the people adapt themselves quickly and end up not paying attention to anything. The marvels of radio, television, the theater (there are 800 and always 'jammed'), where you can choose what you want, the genre, the language that you want, from Chinese to Hebrew." (p263) "...and a skyscraper of more than 110 floors that is being constructed on 44th Street." (p220)

And today, we talk about the woman's vote, but in 1928, Lobato wrote, "This country is in a perpetual fervor of ideas, and it is not just the men who think. The women accompany everything furiously--a serious case, the American woman. They were the ones who elected Hoover and left the Democratic Party in panic..." (p264)

Lobato does not write directly about the stock market's collapse, but in September of 1930 he writes to his sister-in-law, "I entered into the stock market with all the resources that I could gather, sure that I would make a fortune. What a mistake! Instead of winning I lost half my capital and I'm threatened with losing the rest and still owe something. I'm reduced to just my salary, and until when can I count on that? I'm only in my job provisionally, and when a new government takes over it is quite possible that I'll be out on the street." (p297)

About his difficulties with English, in December of 1927, after 6 months residence in the U.S., Lobato writes: "'It is terrible the English,' or rather, it is, for a poor brain like mine, loaded for 40 years with this linguistic infection called Portuguese. I'm trying to see if I can pull the weeds and plant in their place the future universal language--English. I've been reading Mencken's wonderful book 'The American Language' and I have no more doubts. The universal language will be English. Europe has already been passed by. What will remain there will be museums and resorts for American recreation." (p219-220)

What was disconcerting for me reading these letters is that this mention of Mencken is the only mention of American writers in the collection. Ann Douglas's book about New York City in the 1920s, "Terrible Honesty," describes the variety and high quality of writers in New York at the time. The fact that Lobato's English was not very good probably kept him from appreciating the New York literary scene, and then there was probably just too much to take in... As Douglas says: "The era that saw America become the world's most powerful nation also saw New York gain recognition as the world's most powerful city." (6) It is apparent from Lobato's New York letters that he was

overwhelmed with all that lay before him.

These letters can be used as models of how to begin to undertake letter-writing for intermediate students of Portuguese. Letters are usually short, so the attention span that is necessary for students is not a long one, and as one instructor who uses letter writing in her college English classes for nontraditional students says: "When personal, letters are expressive and intimate." (7) This professor has developed a number of specific writing assignments for composition and literature classes which demonstrate the viability of this form of writing. Even in writing across the curriculum classes, such as technical or science classes, writing letters is an effective form of learning.

Monteiro Lobato's letters can also serve as examples of popular history and as travel literature. And I might add, that beginning students of Brazilian literature might find letters such as Monteiro Lobato's easier going than novels. The letters are brief, colloquial, and down-to-earth, so that the Portuguese vocabulary and level of difficulty in reading is low. And Lobato's Portuguese grammar is impeccable.

Notes

1. Edgard Carvalho, in preface to Monteiro Lobato, Cartas Escolhidas, Vol. 1 (Sao Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1964), p.8.

2. Patricia F. Carini. "Dear Sister Bess: An Essay on Standards, Judgment and Writing." Assessing Writing, v1 n1, p.30, 1994. [EJ 498 863]

3. Priscilla Thomas, "Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism of the Epistolary Form in English Literature: A Bibliometric Analysis." [ED 362 885]

4. Marisa Lajolo, Monteiro Lobato (Sao Paulo: Abril Educacao, 1981), p. 102.

5. Nola Kortner Aiex, "Prescient Science Fiction: Monteiro Lobato's 'O Presidente Negro' after 70 Years." Paper presented at the Popular Culture Conference, 1996. [ED 392 061]

6. Ann Douglas, Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), p.4.

7. Donna Reiss, "Letter Writing and New Literacies for Nontraditional Students." Paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Washington), 1995. [ED 387 816]